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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 AMMAN 004561

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TAGS: [JO](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#)

SUBJECT: CAMPAIGN DIRTY TRICKS: VOTE BUYING, MUD SLINGING,
AND PHYSICAL INTIMIDATION

REF: A. AMMAN 4294

[1](#)B. AMMAN 4277

[1](#)C. AMMAN 4559

[1](#)D. AMMAN 4320

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador David Hale
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Campaigning for the November 20 parliamentary elections is in full swing, with candidate tents springing up like mushrooms, posters and banners blanketing the traffic circles, and numerous newspaper editorials devoted to the big questions of representation, benefits of participation, tribal ties vs. issue-based voting, and the modalities with which the government will make good on its commitment to run transparent elections open to domestic monitors (REF A). In the midst of all this above board campaign rhetoric and activity, dirty tricks - some of which are seen as quite effective in campaigning - have provided grist and color for the active rumor mill. Alleged vote buying is the most publicly discussed form of electoral fraud, attracting government and media attention. Candidates insist that they aren't interested in buying votes, but acknowledge that plenty of people are selling them. Meanwhile, the blurry line between providing services and buying votes is difficult for some candidates to manage and gossip purveyors to understand. Mud slinging is seen as an effective campaign tool, and we hear allegations of everything from Israeli support to pernicious vote buying. Some candidates even report being attacked by thugs hired by their rivals. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) The progress of Jordan's campaign season has, up to the present point, been smooth. Under royal assurances that the November 20 parliamentary polls will be free and fair, candidates and voters who we talk to all express confidence in the system. Note: In a poll released November 12 by the Jordan Center for Strategic Studies, fifty-four percent of respondents said that they expected the elections to be free and fair. End note. The government has declared its openness to allowing domestic election monitoring - subject to certain constraints (REF A). Yet even in this context, dirty tricks on the campaign trail have received much attention. The practices of vote buying and transfers of voting district registrations (to be reported septel) have been at the top of the dirty tricks agenda, followed by good old-fashioned mudslinging and inter-campaign violence. Now that election season is well under way, a new round of electoral shenanigans is manifesting itself, to the consternation of voters and candidates alike.

Vote Buying

[1](#)3. (U) Vote buying is a constant topic of discussion during the current campaign season. A news item or editorial on the subject appears almost daily in Jordan's major newspapers. The Jordan Center for Strategic Studies poll cited above

showed that sixty-six percent of respondents said that vote buying was occurring in their districts. PM Marouf al-Bakhit and Interior Minister Eid al-Fayez have made numerous pronouncements on the subject, reiterating that the practice is illegal and that violators will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law (REF B). Both have publicly encouraged the media and civil society to investigate vigorously and expose cases of vote buying in order to create a sense of shame about the practice.

¶4. (C) Every candidate we talk to expresses disgust towards anyone who would sell their vote. Most see the phenomenon as a function of Jordan's economic woes (REF C), and wish that voters would value the future of their country higher than their short term economic well-being. Candidates seem to recognize that their constituents are hungry for clean candidates, and go to great lengths to deny their complicity in any vote-buying scheme. Taghrid al-Breizat, a female candidate in Madaba's second district, has a slogan printed on her business cards: "Those who buy your vote today will sell the future of your children tomorrow".

¶5. (C) Despite their alleged unwillingness to buy votes, every candidate with whom we've spoken acknowledges that they are deluged with calls from vote sellers. Most often these are individuals looking for a little extra cash for themselves and their families, but some candidates report that they have been approached by tribal notables who are willing to sell blocks of votes. A candidate for the Christian seat in Madaba received such a call during a visit by Embassy officers. Theatrically chastising the seller, the candidate said in Arabic, "No, I don't buy votes. Don't you know that people from foreign embassies are watching?"

AMMAN 00004561 002 OF 004

¶6. (C) The estimated price of a vote varies. The general consensus among post contacts is that 100 JD (USD 70) is the going rate for a vote, but some candidates have placed it as high as 200 JD (USD 140) and as low as 50 JD (USD 35). One candidate said that voters were being offered 100 JD plus a mobile phone. Candidates have also told poloffs that the cost of buying votes increases closer to election day. A candidate from the Balqa district (who had just outlined in detail his method of transferring the constituencies of his tribal supporters) remarked that the problem with vote buying is that it is a waste of money. "Just look at the municipal elections," he said. "The candidates who bought votes lost. The people just took the money and never voted." A candidate in Madaba estimated that only twenty percent of vote sellers would actually follow through on their promises. Note: If votes really sell for 100 JD each, vote buying is probably uneconomical for most candidates. The average total budget most candidates are willing to reveal to us is between 100,000 JD and 200,000 JD (USD 70,000-140,000) - not enough at these prices to buy the votes necessary to prevail in any race. End Note.

How To Buy A Vote

¶7. (SBU) Our contacts tell us that there are several ways to buy votes. The most common (which has been reported in the media) is that a voter goes into the polling station with a blank piece of paper that looks like a ballot. Instead of voting with the ballot provided, they use the blank piece of paper and keep the blank ballot for themselves. Once outside, they are paid for this blank official ballot. The next voter then goes into the polling station with the official ballot pre-marked with the name of the preferred candidate. They then vote with that pre-marked ballot, and leave the station with another blank ballot, creating a chain that can be used throughout the day. This system allows vote buyers to confirm that their money is being well spent.

¶8. (SBU) Another method allegedly involves declaring oneself

to be illiterate. Illiterate voters are allowed to verbally declare their preferred candidate to the assembled polling station staff, who then mark the ballot accordingly. Candidates or their representatives, who are legally charged with monitoring the progress of the polls, are present to hear the "illiterate" voter's preference, and arrange for payment later on. NGO observers in July's municipal elections noted use of this method (particularly on the part, it is said, of soldiers bused en masse to polling centers), and called for reforms and consistency across electoral districts in the way the ballots of illiterate voters are counted.

¶9. (C) One candidate mentioned that rather than buying votes, some campaigns are paying people not to vote. This would likely work best in a district with conflicting tribal loyalties, where paying off one tribe not to vote could tip the balance in favor of a candidate from a neighboring tribe.

Buying Votes Or Providing Services?

¶10. (C) For some candidates, the line between buying votes and providing services is a difficult gray area. One Madaba candidate became known to voters through his tribal connections, which allowed him to find jobs and solve problems for his constituents. For many voters, this kind of service provision through "connections" is a prime qualification for any candidate. Most Jordanians we have talked to see their representatives as a personal entree into the bureaucracy - a "fixer" who can cut through red tape and make things happen. Yet in the context of a campaign, this can be seen as a form of corruption. The Madaba candidate decided that for the duration of his campaign, he would stop providing these kinds of services so as to avoid any implication that he was "buying" votes in any way.

¶11. (C) One of his rivals, a former Madaba municipal council member and deputy mayor, had the opposite strategy. He used his medical practice as a campaign tool, offering free and low-cost medical services and providing connections in Jordan's medical bureaucracy to the community as a way of showing his constituents that he was concerned about their welfare and had a solid background in providing services. By doing so, he had acquired a reputation as being "close to the people" and "compassionate", something recognized even by several of his competitors.

The Politics of Personal Destruction

¶12. (C) Candidates report that malicious rumors are an

AMMAN 00004561 003 OF 004

effective means of negative campaigning, and are used often. Allegations of being "the government's candidate" or "an intelligence service candidate" are widespread. Note: For some candidates, being a "government candidate" is an advantage - the assumption being that the government is throwing its resources behind one person, effectively ending the competition for certain seats. End Note. An NGO activist in Zarga who ran several times for parliament in previous elections said that she was accused of having ties to Israel. "They said that I was taking money from Israeli NGOs and using it on my campaign - that I was an Israeli agent," she said.

¶13. (U) On October 29, the English language Jordan Times reported that school age children in the Baqa'a refugee camp were passing out leaflets that contained slogans implying connections between an Islamist candidate and Hamas. The leaflet also declared: "The former deputy from this camp did nothing to help his people. He is a corrupt man who spent his tenure in Parliament traveling around the world instead of taking care of our needs. Four years after we elected him, he wants us to vote for him (again)." The same article

reported the spread of election-related rumors in the northern city of Irbid. The rumor mill reported one candidate to have placed his elderly mother (who was in reality deceased) in a care facility rather than personally deal with her needs.

¶14. (C) Since issue-based campaigns are rare in Jordan, most candidates run on their reputations as clean, honest people. Voters we talk to often characterize their chosen candidate as "a good person" or "very honest". In this context, any tinge of corruption can sink a candidate's chances. Accusations of vote buying are seen by many candidates as the most damning way to chip away at an opponent's credibility. In our meetings, candidates will adamantly deny buying votes themselves, but insist that all other candidates in the race are doing so. A female candidate in Madaba told us that one of her rivals, current MP Falak Jam'ani (an IAF candidate), was virtually assured election because "everybody knows that she is buying votes." Another Madaba candidate reported rumors of phones being given away by his rivals.

Intimidation

¶15. (C) There are scattered reports both in the media and from candidates themselves about physical intimidation as a political weapon. The Jordan Times reported on November 1 that Mohammed Quteish, a candidate in Madaba's first district, was attacked in his car by a group of twenty young men after a campaign event in a neighborhood known as the stronghold of a rival candidate. Clashes between supporters of rival candidates have also been reported near Irbid, where the Ad Dustour newspaper reported on November 2 that a campaign headquarters was vandalized by "unknown men". Mohammed Ali Abu Al Haya, a candidate from Madaba, told us that his first election tent was burned down by unidentified assailants. A few weeks later, he was attacked by four men with knives while on his way home from a long night of campaigning. Fortunately for him, Al Haya recognized one of the men from his time in prison (where he served time for drug-related offenses), and he was able to escape unharmed.

Government Reaction

¶16. (U) In an interview with the semi-official Petra News Agency on November 6, King Abdullah reiterated his stance that "the government is required to conduct free, fair, and transparent elections." In a November 7 visit to Irbid, Interior Minister Eid al Fayez echoed that statement, saying that "all necessary measures should be taken to ensure free and fair elections." Fayez has also made several statements warning the purveyors of dirty tricks that they will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. On October 31, two Amman residents were caught in the act of buying votes after police were tipped off by local citizens. There have been no other reports of prosecutions or cases being prepared against purveyors of dirty tricks.

Comment

¶17. (C) In a campaign where the personality of the candidates is one of the main criteria by which voters make their decisions, one of the best ways to challenge opponents effectively is by sullyng their character. Hence the perceived prominence of vote buying, mud slinging, and occasionally, physical intimidation as campaign issues in an otherwise calm political season. In the absence of well-organized debates around the policy issues facing Jordan

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